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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: YEREVAN AMBASSADORS ISSUE CALL FOR FREE, FAIR ELECTIONS

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1. (SBU) In the wake of the flawed referendum on constitutional changes held in Armenia last November, chiefs of mission accredited to Yerevan found themselves on the same page: almost all had cautiously endorsed the amendments, which were worked out in consultations with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, as a "step in the right direction." But the conduct of the referendum fell short even of everyone's modest expectations: all indications were that there had been massive vote-rigging and fraud.

2. (SBU) In an effort to consider how the European Union might help ensure that Armenia's next set of elections (parliamentary in 2007, presidential in 2008) did not repeat the dismal record of the past, German Ambassador Peitsch invited Ambassador Evans to brief EU chiefs of mission on the U.S. program of measures aimed at this goal that we announced in October. The meeting took place at the German Embassy on February 8. At that meeting, Ambassador Evans proposed to the group that they form, in cooperation with the resident Council of Europe representative and the OSCE head of office, an ambassadorial-level committee to put pressure on the Armenian authorities to summon the political will to hold free and fair elections in 2007/08. The technical programs already underway needed to be complemented by steady pressure at a political level, the Ambassador argued.

3. (SBU) At a meeting of the heads of the four convening parties (EU, OSCE, CoE and US) on February 14, the OSCE head of office (Vladimir Pryakhin) was mandated to call a meeting of all interested ambassadors. Relying heavily on the services of his new American deputy, retired FSO Frank Crump, he did so on March 9. Almost all resident OSCE ambassadors attended, with the exception of the Belarus, Ukrainian, Georgian and Turkmen representatives; Russia was represented at Counselor level. The group adopted a statement (text at para. 5) that was released to the press and ran in a number of media outlets. The participants also discussed possible other future activities that might include a meeting with the ad hoc committee of the Parliament working on revising the electoral code, and meetings with officials of the government and of the Central Electoral Commission. After the session, the EU, OSCE, CoE and US heads of mission held a joint news conference.

4. (SBU) An already existing international working group on elections, chaired by Mr. Crump, which also includes NGO representatives, continues to meet and has not been supplanted by the new formation; on the contrary, the ambassadors' committee is meant to support and complement the work of the existing working group.

5. (U) BEGIN TEXT

Statement by Ambassadors and Heads of Intergovernmental Organisations in Yerevan

The international working group on elections was established in 2002 to provide a forum for the exchange of information and experience among representatives of international organizations and Embassies in Armenia that have been involved in election assistance. The group meets regularly and is chaired by the OSCE Office in Yerevan.

Ambassadors and the heads of intergovernmental organisations involved in the working group met on March 9 and exchanged information about Armenia's progress in preparing for Parliamentary and Presidential elections that will be held in 2007 and 2008.

The participants took note of the steps that have already been initiated by the Armenian authorities, including efforts to update the voters list, the beginning of training for members of electoral commissions, and preliminary steps to review the existing electoral code.

The participants noted that the elections scheduled to take

place next year and the year after would take place in new circumstances following the Constitutional referendum which modified the system of governance in the country. The participants welcomed these changes as constituting, on the whole, progress for Armenia and correcting a number of shortcomings in the constitution as it existed.

At the same time, the shortcomings of previous elections were recalled and the participants noted that those international observers who were invited to witness the voting related to the Constitutional referendum in November concluded that the process was marked by serious abuses. A number of Armenia's leaders have acknowledged that numerous shortcomings were evident and that for this reason a shadow had been cast on the voting process itself.

With these circumstances in mind, the participants agreed that the upcoming elections would be crucial to Armenia's future. They are of the view that a government that is, and is perceived by its population to be, fairly chosen by the people, is not only essential to a just society, but is also a significant factor in political stability, national security, and economic development. A fair and open electoral process is also one of Armenia's international commitments. The participants welcomed statements by a number of Armenian officials that the Government of Armenia was taking steps to ensure that the shortcomings of the past would not be repeated.

Having received numerous indications from the Government of Armenia that their help would be welcomed, several participants of the meeting have indicated their willingness to provide appropriate assistance. They noted, in particular, the importance of assisting with the training of election commission members, the provision of expertise in connection with possible revisions of the electoral code, improvements in the voters list, and the promotion of popular awareness of the procedures that must be followed in order to produce a free and fair election. The meeting stressed the importance of the earliest possible engagement of foreign governments and international organisations in providing requested assistance, having in mind the complexity of electoral process and the time often required to develop and mobilise assistance programs.

The participants expressed the hope that the Government of Armenia would engage civil society in ensuring that the forthcoming elections constitute a unifying process between the people and those who govern them.

9 March 2006

END TEXT
EVANS